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ABSTRACT

Whole language versus phonics: the debate rages on over the proper techniques for teaching reading. Whole language is a child-centered, literature based approach to language teaching that will immerse the students in real communication. The reasons placed behind whole language teaching are based on linguistics, pedagogy, and psychology. In the whole language program, writing and reading go hand in hand as the student begins to string letters together. Phonics is a method of teaching beginners to read and pronounce words by learning the phonetic value of letters, letter groups, and syllables. Phonics has been in use since the 19th century and has been used by teachers since its inception. Phonics is based on interpretation of research findings, partly on theory, and partly on combined experience of classroom teachers. Proponents of each program claim pupil interest in only their program, and each claim the rival program to be dull and drab. There needs to be a combination of whole language and phonics in order for the students to truly succeed. Educators should strive for what is best for the students. (RS)

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The Controversy Between Whole Language versus Phonics

Whole Language versus Phonics: the debate rages on over the proper techniques for teaching reading. The personalities are different as well. If you were to ask Professor Froese from the University of British Columbia, he would espouse whole language as the only approach to teaching students. If you were to ask Professor Chall then the answer would be that phonics is the only proper tool for reading. A student such as myself had to learn about both techniques on order to come to any conclusion.

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Whole Language

Whole language and its meaning for the student is just as the term connotates: the whole package. Whole language is a child centered, literature based approach to language teaching that will immerse the students in real communication. Teachers want to engage the students in meaningful learning. When the student comes into class until he or she finishes that grade the student is being taught whole language in all areas of their learning.

The reasons placed behind whole language teaching are based on linguistics, pedagogy and psychology. The linguistics provide us with the rules on how an ideal language user might use language. The educator gives us the means to use it in class room instruction. The psychologist will explain how real language users would perform in classroom settings. These three are intertwined so that the web of information

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can be used to explain the uses of whole-language in classrooms.

From the teacher's perspective language becomes a natural developing human activity. As the use of language in the classroom increases the student learns as he or she goes along. Language is taught in the entire context instead of being compartmentalized. Language arts programs or periods of time are used. Language is learned holistically first and the refinement is worked on later. Teaching is in a persaonalized manner with the student's individualized needs are stressed. The teacher is the model learner on which the student can follow.

Oral language is one of the first things that accompanies reading and writing. The student needs to be able to talk out what thay are going to write or read out loud. Children should talk as they learn and children will talk about life experiences, books being read, or happenings in the home.The whole-language classroom becomes a talking classroom.

Writing is another integral part of the whole language usage in the classroom. From the time the student starts in the classroom he or she is learning to become a writer. Whether this be with a journal, notes, or letters the student is encouraged to begin writing. Writing becomes a language function. The children then write to learn instead of learning to write. Students can experiment with free writing, free associations, letters and words.

Along with writing comes spelling of words. In the use of whole language and

the process approach to writing, the errors that come from beginners are put aside until a later date in order to concentrate on the meaning behind the sentence. The student will use letters that are closest to the actual letters and get what is close to the correct spelling, students will internalize the convention of the English language. The student will internally process the word and then write down what that word looks like on paper. As a result they begin to internalize and make corrections on the basic words themselves. By putting their worries or fears aside about their spelling or punctuation then the ideas will flow onto the paper as the students become more creative. Personal writing can then flow into an area like life writing. The students can draw from their life memories or experiences to write about, things that are important to them, such as interests or family occurrences. The importance lies in the meaning of the text and the task of making it meaningful.

The use of literature in the classroom is also encouraged. The classroom is designed to give a variety to children's literature and understandfing. In their book "Teaching Elementary Language Arts" A literature approach, Coody and Nelson suggest that when children hear stories and poems read aloud, their listening skills improve. When children see literature as a basis for new experiences and as a source of entertainment then they will want to practice this new form of entertainment. Literature becomes a form of recreation that the students will want to experience and enjoy.

The most important area and the one that needs to be discussed is reading. In the whole-language program writing and reading will go hand in hand as the student will begin to string letters together and the creation of words and sentences will be created. The students will go through five stages in reading and writing: the pre-phonetic, the semi-phonetic, the phonetic, the transitional and the conventional or mature. It is not necessary to go into the different stages but the student will progress along the different stages at their own pace. The teacher becomes the facilitator and model for the students to improve from. The language experience activity is an activity on which the teacher models writing for the students. With the use of the teacher as a model the students will improve their writing skills. Where there is writing so there is reading also and the student is gaining from that experience of writing and reading in conjunction.

From this point the students will begin to read orally in a positive and appropriate manner with the teacher again as the model. The students will not be required to read material that is foreign to them. This would be considered detrimental to them and their development. A student in oral reading should never be required to do this without preparation, never in large quantities and carefully structured.

The language experience approach would involve the students own experiences. The teacher uses the students experiences and these are writtten, by

the students, into a story which can then be read orally or used as the students reading material. Then there is an increased use of vocabulary on which the students can learn to recognize and be used in writing. Also the use of flashcards is practiced. Comprehension I becomes most important as students need comprehension in orderto improve their skills.

There are other ideas that the Whole-Language teachers could use in the classrooms. From the students own reading books the student could progress to writing in their own journals. Journals would empower the students to make more contact with the teacher and allow the teacher to see the improvement in the student's writing and thought process.

The teacher could also use drama in terms of enrichment and using drama for language and learning. Children have an inclination to dress up to look grown up or to mimic parents. They also like to make believe and the world of fantasy. This process in a student's life could be mastered to become part of a whole language program. Children willingly participate in plays and skits and at the same time are enhancing language and verbal skills. Again the teacher assumes the role of facilitator in the production of the drama play. The relationship between teacher and students may be different as the teacher may become part of the play. The power of language is stressed in that there are increasing demands put on the children in regards to cognition. Included in these demands are the building blocks of trust and confidence.

The students need these in both each other and in the teacher in order for success to occur in a play.

Whole-Language advocates believe students should become empowered to take control of their own learning. By doing so they are the originators of their own education and learning. The students will learn the whole process originating within him or herself and by him or herself. The teacher is strictly the facilitator in that learning. The learning becomes the whole process with instructional activities focusing on whole stories, dramas, and others and not single skills that lead up top the whole story. By learning it all the student gains the whole picture at once.

Finally the organization for a whole-language classroom, accordingly, becomes different. Organizing the curriculum is to be more integrated with units and themes along with the approach. With the tieing in of all areas to the whole language approach the student is getting all he or she needs in one entire package. The parents also become involved. These parents are active in the proper academic growth of their children. Many children have been pre-schooled and the parents are mature people established in careers and lives. As such the teacher needs to have these parents actively involved in the life of the student in school and at home.

Whole language researchers have found that language experience programs have produced successful readers with the added benefits of development in oral language, vocabulary and the attitudes of the student towards reading and their own

self-esteem.

Phonics

Phonics: from the word phonology is a method of teaching beginners to read and pronounce words by learning the phonetic value of letters, letter groups and syllables. Phonics has been around since the 19th century and has been used by teachers since its inception. It is a process of reading which has as one of its goals of being completely defined from the beginning. This includes word recognition, comprehension, interpretation, appreciation and application of what is read.The child should start with meaning reading of whole words, sentences and stories. Silent reading is stressed from the start.

After the child recognizes fifty or so words from sight analyzation should start in relationship between the sounds in spoken words(phonemes) and the letters representing them(graphemes). Even before instruction in phonics has begun, and then again after, the child should be encouraged to identify new words by picture and meaning clues. Structural analysis should begin about the same time as phonics and should be continued longer. Word perception is the term commonly used to describe the different ways of identifying new words, phonics being only one of these ways. Instruction in phonics should be spread over the six years a student is in elementary school. It begins off slow in first grade or kindergarten and builds up momentum as the student gets into the upper grades. Drill or practice in phonics

should be avoided. Phonics should be integrated with some meaningful reading. The child should not isolate sounds and then blend them to form words. The child should identify unknown words through a process of visual analysis and substitution. Repetition of words for pupils should be done often in the first three or so grades. These words should appear to the students most frequently in general reading material. The words should also be within the the student's vocabulary for listening and understanding. Again, the student should be able to start easily in the earlier grades with preperatory time being stressed. If a student is found to be unprepared for reading then more time should be allowed him or her. Also the students should be matched up according to their reading ability with three or four students per group.

These principles are the basis for which phonics has been used in classrooms for many years. Phonics has been based on interpretation of research findings, partly on theory, and partly on combined experience of classroom teachers. Added to this the faith of belief that the process has worked. This process has worked as it has been used by teachers for more than a third of a century. It also comes, as does whole language, with the backing of psychologists, researchers and teachers who have studied and used this process. From 1930 to 1960 phonics has been the process used. these principles were incorporated in the widely used basal-reading series and teacher's guides. They have been taught by college teachers to future teachers of reading; and they have been followed by most classroom teachers.

Since the late 1950's and early 1960's phonics has been challenged by other programs. The popular success of "Why Johnny Can't Read" has caused some to questiion its ability to teach reading. It has caused some educators to come up with their own ideas on teaching. The controversy over reading continues. We have seen what whole language is now let us see phonics as it is put into practice.

The basic phonics program starts with the alphabet. Students are encouraged to learn the alphabet letter for letter. The alphabet being the most important aspect of the beginning of phonics the students are taught in kindergarten. Then in kindergarten or the first grade the teacher would begin the phonics lesson.

The first thing the teacher would begin with is the short vowel sounds. The student would begin to use these short vowels and would follow along with the teacher in group ressitation. The teacher would point these sounds out to the students while reading aloud to the class. The teacher could mimic the short sounds in song or on the blackboard for the students to see. The students would then be learning the vowels and the short sounds to them. At the same time the teacher would begin to introduce the students to two consonants a week. A kindergartner or a first grader would have to be taken along slowly so as not to get lost. The students would then begin to see the difference in the letters, consonants and vowels, and memorize them. Along with this the teacher would then begin to introduce one vowel words with short sounds. A teacher could introduce the students to the vowels and

consonants such as p + vowels to make simple words such as pan, pet, pig, pop and pup. Songs could be made out of the short words and students could sing along. Another possibility could be the teacher could make rythms for the students to follow along with. The teacher is adding to the students vocabulary and assisting them in basic reading. None of the seperate phonics systems teaches the students all that he or she needs in beginning reading. All are designed for use with the basic readers.

The students are then introduced to the long vowel sounds. Words such as I, the, a and we are very important for the beginning student. The teacher will also have to explain the one vowel, two vowel rule and the importance of these rules in English. Now the word mad can become made or at becomes ate. All along, the students are picking up words and adding them to their vocabulary.

The next thing being taught to the students would be the consonant blend. Words that begin with two consonants such as pl or cr and many more are explained. The words need to be short for the students but once they pick up on the meaning then the students can expand their vocabulary again and expand their usage of words. By the end of kindergarten the students will be writing simple sentences. The teacher will have explained the capital letter to begin the sentence and the period at the end. By taking the time to cover this information with and for the students the proper makings for sentences are there. Also the students will be able to disect a word for the proper pronunciations. Students will be able to write journals, letters

without the correction because the guarantees are already in place.

Classrooms need not be quiet and solemn areas reserved for prisons. Children could be working on phonics in art and music as well as reading. The children could be equally challenged and working in advanced mathematics.Whether the classes were highly structured or not would make no difference.

As the students move into first grade this information would be reviewed quickly for the students who need that or because of the summer vacation and the chances that the information may be somewhat forgotten. The students would then begin new phonics information. The consonants would distinguish initial, medial and then final positions. There would be two sounds for c and for g. This would be followed by consonant digraphs: th, sh, wh, ch. Consonant combinations and consonant clusters would follow. Consonant clusters would contain: s-, l-, r- tw-, sc-, sm-. Then three letter clusters: ser,squ, spl, spr, str, and thr.The vowel usage would increase in difficulty with the short and long sounds such as a and u. There would be variant patterns, vowel + r, ou, ow, and the vowel y would all be included. Finally in the first grade, word structures would be worked on, such as plurals, compound words, contractions, root words and endings, schwa sounds and syllabication would be covered. This information would all be covered slowly over the entire first grade so as the students could grasp the material in thorough detail. As the student progresses the material would increase in difficulty as the student begins to learn

then more material would become part of the student's vocabulary and learning. This process would continue throughout the elementary years ensuring the students learning and building upon what the students have learned from the previous year.

In conclusion, this writer would observe that each proponent would claim pupil interest in only their program. Each would claim that the rival program to be dull and drab with the students totally turning off both teacher and what is being taught. Pupil interest can be seen in whatever program is done just as research can be found to justify any new idea that is used. This writer would stress that what is best for the student is what needs to be used. When using whole language can the teacher fully justify the use of that method when there are certain students who could fall through the cracks and not learn at all. To say that the students will learn but not to back that up with actual proof is but a pre-supposition. Without the quarantees that the student is learning is not conducive to the student. Without the guarantees that the student has gained the material such as correction of materials handed in then the student doesn't learn from mistakes and move on. On the other hand, the student that progresses along quickly could get bored in a phonics classroom. There needs to be a combination of both in order for the students to truly succeed. Recently the state of California enacted a policy that the state would begin to use phonics in reading in many of the classrooms in the state. By this step the state recognized that the student needed more in learning reading and writing than what

was given to them in the present time. As a result, phonics will be taught in the classroom as well as or instead of whole language. Let us strive for what is best for the students in our classrooms. Let us not forget the successes of the past as we move ahead in the future. As teachers we need what is best for the students in the classrooms. After all, isn't that what we are in the teaching profession for?

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